



## State of Tennessee

Justin P. Wilson, State Comptroller

For Immediate Release: Oct. 15, 2012

### **Former Upper Cumberland Development District Executive Director Used Public Funds to Support a Lavish Lifestyle**

The Upper Cumberland Development District's (UCDD) former executive director Wendy Askins called an independent living facility for seniors "one of the sweetest projects in the history of [her] career." However, only a small handful of seniors lived in the facility after it was completed. And their accommodations were significantly less luxurious than those Askins and her daughter enjoyed after they moved into the publicly-funded facility's main living quarters.

A report released today by the State Comptroller's Division of Investigations identified numerous UCDD transactions that did not appear to serve a public or governmental purpose. The report concluded that the volume and type of inappropriate transactions identified indicates that the UCDD board of directors failed to uphold its duty to follow sound business and accounting practices, to ensure that all disbursements were appropriate, and to act in the best interests of the district and its goals.

Development districts are created to promote economic growth and development and to serve those in need within each district's boundaries. The vast majority of funding for the Upper Cumberland Development District and its programs comes from taxpayer dollars from state and federal government.

The Living the Dream Project was designed and planned by Askins while she served as executive director of the UCDD. The Comptroller's investigators questioned numerous transactions Askins ordered which did not appear to be in the development district's best interests. The investigators pursued a trail of improper spending on a project that appeared to primarily benefit Askins and certain members of her family.

Askins personally selected tens of thousands of dollars in upgrades for the main area of the home which she and her daughter occupied by themselves. Askins paid more than \$6,000 for steam showers for both her and her daughter's bathrooms, more than \$1,500 for a double-sided fireplace in the home's main living area, nearly \$1,000 for a fireplace in her own master bedroom, and more than \$7,000 for decorative fountains. Askins also spent more than \$25,000 on a curved staircase for the home which led to her daughter's upstairs living area.

By last February, the project had a price tag of nearly \$1.4 million, the Comptroller's report revealed.

Among the many unnecessary purchases for the Living the Dream home, Askins and various family members received more than \$24,000 in direct personal benefits from transactions she orchestrated with the development district. Askins used nearly \$10,000 in district funds to purchase used furniture, televisions and exercise equipment from herself for use in her Living the Dream home and more than \$14,000 to purchase other used furniture and items from her immediate family. She also submitted a false reimbursement request and received nearly \$3,000 from UCDD for catering expenses related to a political campaign event not associated with the development district. Additionally, Askins reimbursed herself \$1,229 for other personal expenses such as fuel for her personal out-of-state travel and her personal credit card fees.

In 2011, Askins spent \$2,000 in UCDD funds to purchase a 3-D capable computer and \$99 for 3-D glasses, and incurred over \$600 in costs for ring-back tones, premium texts and music downloads on her district cell phone, according to investigators.

The Comptroller's report further details that at its 2010 annual meeting, the UCDD treated board members and approximately 80 other guests to food and entertainment at a local winery. This meeting alone cost the agency more than \$6,200 and appear to further no public or governmental purposes.

Investigators attribute the magnitude of such waste and abuse to the fact that Askins and her deputy director had unfettered discretion to spend public funds on a far-too-wide range of items and that board members were not providing adequate oversight to protect the public's interests.

"Even though the board may not be directly to blame for such rampant misuses of public funds, it was inherent in their fiduciary responsibilities to supervise Wendy Askins, the Living the Dream project, and to ensure that all development district funds were spent entirely for the benefit of those who are served by the district," said L. Rene Brison, Assistant Director of Investigations for the Comptroller's office.

"These types of abuses of the public trust are likely to outrage many citizens who live within the Upper Cumberland Development District boundaries – and rightfully so," Comptroller Justin P. Wilson said. "Every public dollar that's spent for the personal benefit of a government official is one less dollar that can be spent to benefit the people who need government services. I hope and trust that the Upper Cumberland Development District will put safeguards in place to guard against this type of waste and abuse in the future."

To view the full report online, go to:  
<http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/repository/ia/20121015UCCDAudit.pdf>

To view photos of the contrasting accommodations of the UCDD's executive director and the senior citizens who lived in the Living the Dream facility, go to:  
<http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/repository/NR/20121015TheLivingTheDreamProject.pdf>

Media contact: Blake Fontenay, Communications Director, (615) 253-2668 or [blake.fontenay@tn.gov](mailto:blake.fontenay@tn.gov)

[Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury](#)  
State Capitol Nashville, TN 37243  
Phone: (615) 741-2501  
Email: [comptroller.web@cot.tn.gov](mailto:comptroller.web@cot.tn.gov)